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**Lead Company Agrees to Buy Homes***Associated Press, Friday, March 22, 2002, 19:40 EST*

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ST. LOUIS (AP) -- The owner of the nation's largest lead smelter will offer buyouts to about 160 homeowners in the small town of Herculaneum, where tests show many children have elevated levels of lead in their blood.

The agreement with the Doe Run Co., reached Thursday with state officials, adds to the government-mandated cleanup already under way in the town south of St. Louis, where the company's smelter is the major employer.

It's the largest home buyout in the state forced by environmental contamination since the Environmental Protection Agency closed down the nearby town of Times Beach in 1982 because of dioxin contamination.

"There is still a long way to go in Herculaneum," Gov. Bob Holden said Friday. "However, yesterday we took a huge step forward."

The agreement requires Doe Run to immediately offer to buy the homes of residents with children under age 6 who live nearest the smelter and slag pile. The company, over the next 2[ years, also will offer buyouts to all residents within a slightly wider area.

The state Department of Health and Senior Services released a study last month that found elevated lead levels in the blood of 28 percent of all Herculaneum children.

A follow-up report released Tuesday showed that more than half the children living within a half-mile of the smelter have elevated levels of lead in their blood, which can affect intelligence and cause other health problems.

The company will meet with residents to discuss the buyout; a date for the meeting has not been set.

"I'm glad they thought enough of the children to get them out of this mess," said Dennis Shore, who lives about two blocks from the smelter, told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. A recent blood test showed his 3-year-old granddaughter, Madison, had lead levels nearly twice the federal standard for lead poisoning.

Unlike at Times Beach, which was erased from the map during a 15-year effort to eradicate dioxin pollution, the state did not want to shut down the smelter, or close down Herculaneum and force

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all of its 2,800 residents to move.

"Movement of the children immediately and some sort of structure to move people away from the smelter was our intention," said Mike Hartmann, the governor's chief of staff.

Located a few miles from Herculaneum along the Mississippi River, Times Beach was contaminated in the 1970s from dioxin-laced waste oil sprayed on the town's dirt streets to keep dust down.

The government eventually spent \$118 million to buy out the town's 2,300 residents and clean dioxin-contaminated soil and debris from Times Beach and 26 other eastern Missouri sites.

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